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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SHANGHAI 000462

SIPDIS

STATE ALSO FOR DRL/IRF

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [CH](#)

SUBJECT: SHANGHAI HOUSE CHURCH CLOSED, PASTOR TEMPORARILY DETAINED

REF: A. (A) BEIJING 3124

[1](#)B. (B) BEIJING 3073

[1](#)C. (C) 08 SHANGHAI 408 AND PREVIOUS

CLASSIFIED BY: BEATRICE CAMP, CONSUL GENERAL, US CONSULATE
SHANGHAI, DEPARTMENT OF STATE.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Local authorities closed a Shanghai house church and detained the pastor earlier this month, a move that coincided with the closure of a popular house church in Beijing (Refs A and B). Consulate contacts expressed concern that U.S. Government pressure on the Shanghai Municipal Government to loosen restrictions on house churches ultimately could have the opposite effect. End Summary.

Local House Church Closed to Worshippers

[1](#)2. (C) Authorities in Shanghai's Minhang District closed the popular Wanbang Church in early November, reportedly locking the doors of the "house church" on November 12. The move reportedly followed a decision by the church's leadership to rent or buy a new commercial worship space for its rapidly growing congregation. Shanghai Municipal Religious Affairs Bureau official Wang Xinhua told PolOff the church was closed because "its operation was not approved by the local authorities and was therefore illegal." Wang said Wanbang Church members should respect the local government's decision and instead worship at an official Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) church.

[1](#)3. (C) In the two weeks since the closure, authorities detained Wanbang pastor Cui Quan for short periods on several occasions

and took away his mobile phone. According to Li Feng, a professor at East China University of Political Science and Law who is connected to several house churches, the police also confiscated documents from Wanbang Church. Police prevented the unregistered house church from holding an outdoor service, detaining six church leaders (including Cui) over the November 21-22 weekend.

Linked to Events in Beijing?

¶4. (C) Wanbang's difficulties in Shanghai coincided with a high-profile house church closure in Beijing during November (Refs A and B). Liu Ping, a professor at Fudan University and a member of the Xiaoyuan House Church, said on November 23 that while the Wanbang Church in Shanghai and the Shouwang Church in Beijing are not connected, the local authorities' "identical reactions" to the two congregations must have been "directed from the top." Liu believes top leaders in the Central Government remain suspicious of Christian congregations as a possible threat to the government. Li Feng at East China University of Political Science and Law reiterated the commonly held view that Chinese government officials are not suspicious of "individual religious practice" but rather of organized, public gatherings that are outside the state's control.

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¶5. (C) Liu claimed the environment for house churches in China has grown steadily worse in the past year following an October 2008 symposium on religion in Beijing. During the "Beijing Summit on Chinese Spirituality and Society" at Beijing University, two notable China Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) scholars -- Liu Peng from the CASS American Studies Institute and Yu Jianrong from the Center for the Study of Social Problems at the CASS Institute of Rural Development -- both advocated for "making house churches legal and public." According to Fudan University's Liu Ping, from Shanghai's perspective, house churches appear to have faced greater scrutiny and pressure in the year since the conference.

Growing Pains: More Members, More Problems

¶6. (C) House churches in Shanghai face difficulties when they outgrow their meeting spaces and need to move to new locations. Government officials feel threatened by a congregation of 500 people, Liu Ping said. (Note: Press reports estimate the size of the Wanbang Church congregation at 1,000 but Consulate contacts said the figure was 500-600. End Note.) Wanbang is the second Shanghai house church in a year to be closed down, Liu said. Jindengtai Church was closed in 2008 when it also grew "too big." Li Feng agreed, stating that the large scale of the Wanbang Church was "too public" for the government despite being far from the city center. "House churches are OK," Li said. "But public worship in large numbers at an unrecognized church is not."

¶7. (C) As a result, many Shanghai house churches are intentionally choosing to stay small or worship in small groups. For example, Xiaoyuan House Church, a large congregation comprised primarily of Fudan University students and faculty,

hopes to avoid problems by acting "according to the law" and meeting in several different homes in small groups rather than seeking to buy or rent a large space to meet as one congregation, Liu Ping stated. Government officials are especially nervous about house church growth in university districts or wealthier areas, he added. Shanghai house church leaders should "avoid politicizing" the role of house churches, lest they give the municipal government a reason to crack down further, Liu said. In this case, Tongji University professor Zhu Dake believes Wanbang Church was closed because church members are "poor farmers who can't fight back" and the closure would "send a message" to other house churches in wealthier parts of the city.

Next Steps for Wanbang's Congregation

18. (C) The South China Morning Post reported on November 23 that Wanbang church members were able to worship informally at a local park on November 22 despite the detention of pastor Cui and other leaders. However, the church's future remains unclear. Li Feng said the church would like to be formally recognized by the local government and has applied officially for recognition, but there is "no chance" Wanbang would be granted official status because "if one church is granted permission, then that will lead to many requests for recognition." Li said he does not believe Wanbang's leaders have political motives, adding that the church is not seeking a conflict with the local government over recognition.

The U.S. Government's Role?

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19. (C) Li continued that the U.S. and Chinese approaches to organized religion remain "very different." In the United States, there is no concept of "managing religion," he noted. U.S. Government attention to house churches in Shanghai only serves to confirm Chinese government suspicion about the political nature of their activities, Li said. Liu Ping likewise predicted that U.S. Government pressure on the Shanghai Municipal Government to loosen restrictions on house churches ultimately could have the opposite effect. "If you (the United States) apply pressure, then the Chinese government could make it worse for house churches," Liu said. "It is a difficult situation."

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